

# Out of the Valley of

Story by Beth Reece    Photos by Paul Disney

**D**EATH devoured Landing Zone X-Ray in Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley on Nov. 14, 1965. As if starved, it swallowed the lives of American infantrymen as they fell beneath a torrent of bullets that popped like hail in a thunderstorm.

In the meager shelter of the jungle floor, wounded and fighting soldiers glimpsed an unarmed helicopter darting through the sky. In the cockpit sat CPT Ed Freeman, chancing death in what he still calls his "baby," a "tool" of which he knew every nut and bolt.

"It was a matter of when, I figured, that I would die. But they were already dying," Freeman said of the men caught in the valley below with dwindling ammo and medical supplies. "If I could do anything to prevent my comrades from getting killed, then

that's what I had to do." So back and forth between safety and battle he soared for 14 hours, carrying in supplies and hauling out some 30 wounded men.

Time was fair to Freeman during the Vietnam War. It protected him from death, though his helicopter took numerous hits. While time has not blotted out the bloody scenes that darken Freeman's dreams, President George W. Bush gave the pilot's memory of the war a new conclusion on July 15. In a White House ceremony before 300 guests, Bush draped the Medal of Honor, dangling from its blue ribbon, around Freeman's neck.

"This moment is well deserved, and it's been long in coming," Bush said before presenting America's highest military honor to the 150th recipient alive today.

After almost one hour of what some survivors call the fiercest gunfire they'd ever seen, the commander — LTC Harold G. Moore — had a change of heart. He asked for volunteers to fly in ammo, water and supplies. Instinctively, Freeman crawled into his UH-1A Iroquois. Fourteen hours and 14 rescue missions later, at 10:30 that night, he'd eaten only half a can of franks and beans. His body throbbed. "And I got sick," he said, "you know, because of nerves."

Freeman's bravery became the miracle that kept America's soldiers fighting in one of the war's most savage attacks. His Medal of Honor citation declares that without the ammunition he supplied to the infantrymen, "they would almost surely have experienced a greater loss of life."

And though the pilots of medical-evacuation helicopters refused to fly into the fire, Freeman whisked away almost 30 wounded soldiers who might not have otherwise survived.

Haunted by death and war, the 73-year-old won't forget the minutes he spent with the soldiers of 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, before dropping them into Landing Zone X-Ray. The soldiers he remembers were young: 18- and 19-year-olds, one of them from Wisconsin. When he visualizes them today, they have faces but no names: some are mangled; others lay wrapped in body bags.

"I have bad, bad dreams and trouble sleeping." With pills from a doctor, Freeman finds slumber. "But he can't keep me from dreaming — no doctor can do that." Months ago, the hero dreamed that his helicopter crashed.

At age 13, Freeman watched truckloads of soldiers pass his Mississippi farm on their way to train for World War II in the Louisiana Maneuvers. "I'd wanted to be a soldier all my life," he said.

He became a man of valor. "He's

## Beyond Duty's Call

Freeman's unit — Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division — was trained to land troops in the jungle, but their mission backfired that day.

"We flew into the landing zone four times without taking one round," Freeman said. "The Vietnamese were hiding there waiting for us." Then, on the fifth drop, 2,000 enemy troops raged opened fire on the 450 American soldiers.

"We went out to pick up more troops and the infantry commander called back to say, 'No more helicopters. You can't come in here. They'll shoot you right out of the sky,'" Freeman said.

**A visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall gave Freeman an eerie feeling, because the monument bears the names of men Freeman supervised as a flight leader.**



# Death



**President George W. Bush presented the Medal of Honor to retired MAJ Ed Freeman July 16 for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life."**

even more than a soldier because he did more than his duty," Bush said.

## Rejection

The pilot who saved lives was at first rejected for flight school. Coming out of Korea with a battlefield promotion to first sergeant, Freeman had tired of fighting on foot. "That's a horrible way to fight a war," he said, having been one of 14 men out of 257 assigned to Company B, 36th Engineer Battalion, who survived the initial fight for Pork Chop Hill.

Freeman applied for flight school but was turned away for exceeding the 6-foot-2-inch height limit. A year later the Army adjusted the height requirements to draw in additional pilots, admitting Freeman into its exclusive club.

The Medal of Honor comes at a time when Freeman feels he can quietly savor its value. Had he been

awarded the medal while still in the Army, he thinks he might have stayed in uniform. "I would have gotten plush assignments to be a pretty boy, standing around and signing autographs."

Instead, in 1967 he retired with 22 years of military and settled in Boise, Idaho, where he lives today with his wife, Barbara. He continued to fly for the Department of Interior until his second retirement in 1991. Now he relishes being a "professional" grandpa to four grandchildren.

## An American Hero

The day after last summer's White House ceremony, Freeman visited the Vietnam Memorial clad in blue jeans and a white shirt that enhanced the brilliance of his Medal of Honor. Tourists stopped to stare. Some took photos or eavesdropped on his conversations.

"I believe so strongly in defending this country — for my children and my grandchildren, for people I don't even know who enjoy all of this," he said, gesturing toward the nation's capital with its solemn monuments to those whose deaths bought freedom.

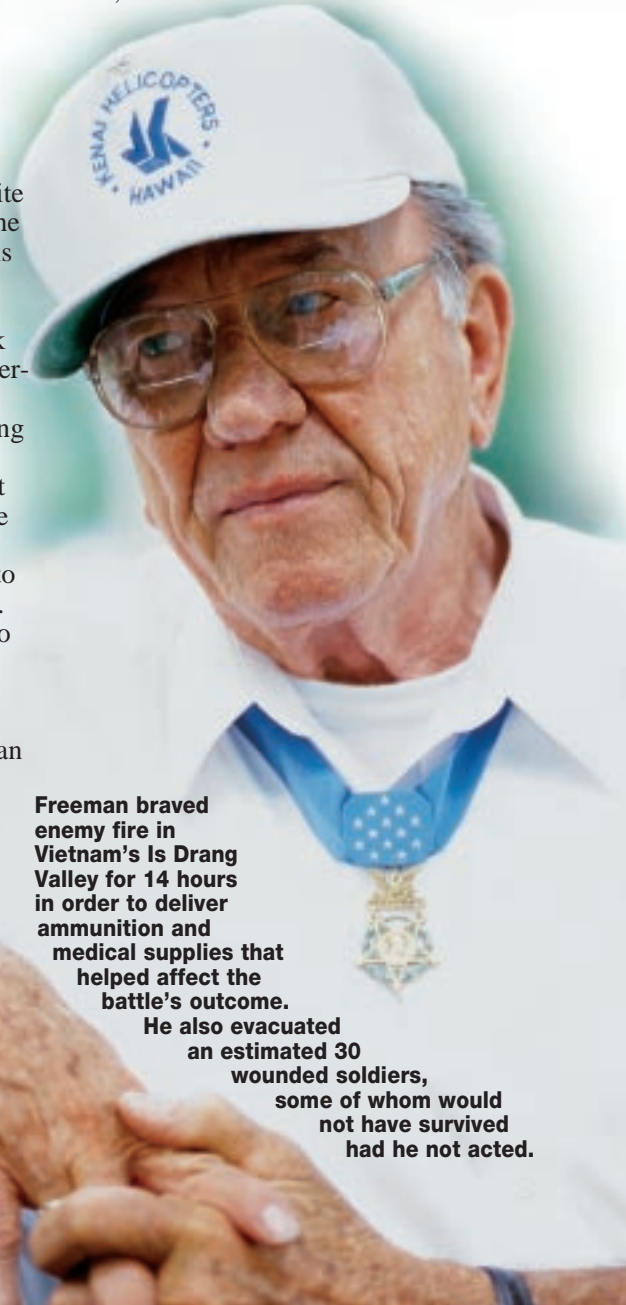
No one, the veteran said, seeks to win a Medal of Honor. "And if they did, I think they'd find a body bag first."

Hand clutching his belly, Freeman whispered of the eerie vibe that pervades him when he visits the wall bearing the names of those Americans killed in Vietnam. Is it the memory? The wonder of how he survived? Though he can't recall each name, the wall announces the deaths of men Freeman supervised as a flight leader, men much like himself

with fearful families awaiting their return from war.

Next to all those names engraved on the wall and among all the Medal of Honor heroes, Freeman confesses to feeling small. "I helped drop those men into that valley," he said. "How could I just leave them there?"

But the Army didn't demand that he risk his life in the valley devoured by death. It merely asked for volunteers, and Freeman said: "I will." □



**Freeman braved enemy fire in Vietnam's Is Drang Valley for 14 hours in order to deliver ammunition and medical supplies that helped affect the battle's outcome.**

**He also evacuated an estimated 30 wounded soldiers, some of whom would not have survived had he not acted.**